

Executive Summary

Direct Investigation Report

Management and Effectiveness of Waste Separation Bins

Introduction

In 1998, the Government promulgated the Waste Reduction Framework Plan, advocating separate collection of recyclable materials to facilitate recovery and reuse. According to the Plan, Government departments would place waste separation bins (commonly known as “three-colour recycling bins” and hereinafter referred to as “recycling bins”) at locations under their management for collection of waste paper, aluminium cans and plastic bottles, thereby encouraging the public to participate in waste reduction and recycling. Through the Source Separation of Waste Programme, the Environmental Protection Department (“EPD”) also distributed recycling bins to participating residential, commercial and industrial buildings for free.

2. Around 18,000 sets of recycling bins are currently provided by various Government departments across the territory. Participating departments, including EPD, the Leisure and Cultural Services Department (“LCSD”), the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department (“AFCD”) and the Housing Department (“HD”), arrange proper collection and maintenance services according to the situation and need of the locations or venues for effective management of the recycling bins.

3. The provision of recycling bins has been implemented for years. However, there were media reports that recycling bins were often mixed with litter, which contaminated the recyclables inside and affected the recycling effectiveness, and might have caused environmental hygiene problems. The media also reported that some recyclables collection service contractors (“the Contractors”), for various reasons, disposed of recyclables from recycling bins together with refuse, thus undermining public confidence in the authorities’ effective management of the recycling bins. In this connection, we launched a direct investigation to examine the authorities’ management of recycling bins and effectiveness in implementing the relevant programme, with a view to recommending improvement measures where necessary.

Our Comments

4. While the quantity of recyclables collected from recycling bins in public places such as roadside is limited, amounting to less than 0.1% of the total amount of recyclables in Hong Kong annually, these bins are very conspicuous in the community. The effectiveness of these bins will directly affect public confidence in the authorities' measures on waste separation and recovery.

5. Since 1 October 2020, EPD has taken over the management of recycling bins in public places from the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department ("FEHD") and implemented a number of improvement measures. The measures include designing a new look for the recycling bins and changing the original litter compartment for collection of recyclables (mainly plastic bottles) to increase collection capacity and reduce the chance of misplacement of litter into recycling bins by the public. A rapid reporting system has also been launched, enabling the public to use the QR code or hotline number on the recycling bins or WhatsApp, an instant mobile messaging application, to report matters such as overfilled or damaged bins to the Contractor directly. EPD has also stepped up the monitoring of the Contractor through different means, including the supervision teams formed by the Contractor as required by EPD, the quality assurance teams set up by a third-party organisation (i.e. the Hong Kong Productivity Council) and its own staff. Since the implementation of the above improvement measures by EPD, there has been initial improvement in the management of recycling bins in public places. We find the efforts of EPD commendable.

6. In light of our findings, we have the following comments.

Labels on Recycling Bins in Public Places

7. The existing labels on recycling bins in public places are rather simple. Users of recycling bins can obtain recycling information (such as the strategies of "Clean Recycling of Three Types of Paper" and "Priority Recovery of Plastic Bottles", or the clean recycling procedures) by scanning the QR codes on the bins. While EPD's idea of adding QR codes to the recycling bins is praise-worthy, it cannot be ruled out that some people do not bother to scan the QR codes and read the instructions. We reckon that the overly simple labels on the recycling bins fail to effectively minimise improper use of the bins and contamination of recyclables.

8. For more effective management of recycling bins in public places which are

prone to problems, and as part of its publicity and education initiatives, EPD should display recycling information in a more straight-forward manner for the public to learn about the proper way of using recycling bins more conveniently and speedily. As EPD expects to gradually install newly designed bins after field trials, we recommend that it review the existing labels on recycling bins in public places in one go, and consider providing more recycling information in textual and graphical forms on the newly designed bins.

Information Available on Mobile Application

9. At present, members of the public can use the “Waste Less” mobile application of EPD to search for the locations of all recycling bins in public places throughout Hong Kong. In our site visits on a random sample of recycling bins, we found inconsistencies of several locations indicated by the app with the actual site situation, with no recycling bins at the indicated locations or nearby. In our second round of site visits after three months, the information remained not updated which was unsatisfactory. Besides, photographs of recycling bins shown in the app still displayed former designs of bins in public places under the management of FEHD. Consequently, the public might mistakenly perceive that those bins were still managed by FEHD. We are pleased to note that EPD has updated the information on the app in early February 2022. We recommend that EPD update information available on the app in a timely manner to ensure its accuracy.

Collaboration with Other Departments

10. Taking reference from the collaboration models with AFCD and LCSD, EPD is liaising with HD to explore further enhancements to the waste separation programme implemented in public housing estates, so as to ensure proper collection of recyclables by downstream recyclers. EPD also continues to promote the Source Separation of Waste Programme to more Government departments and offer necessary support. It strives to strengthen individual departments’ existing resource recovery practice, thereby raising and quantifying the recycling effectiveness.

11. Currently, among the departments responsible for recycling bin management, only EPD maintains statistics on the overall recovery rate of recycling bins. We consider the overall recovery rate of recycling bins highly useful for relevant departments to monitor the effectiveness of recycling bins, review their distribution and management strategies, and come to grips with the public’s behaviour in relation to

waste recycling. We recommend that EPD provide departments responsible for recycling bin management with more technical support and actively encourage them to maintain more recycling data (such as the overall recovery rate of recycling bins), thereby facilitating the monitoring and adjustment of the management strategies of recycling bins.

Release of Data on Operation of Recycling Bins and Sharing of Successful Experience

12. The views we received from members of the public show that many of them are sceptical about the effectiveness of recycling bins. Such a public perception has apparently taken root over the years. As EPD has taken over the management of recycling bins in public places since October 2020 and introduced a number of improvement measures subsequently, we consider that EPD may release data on the operation of those bins regularly, including the total collection quantities, quantities of recyclables, recovery rate, reports of overfilled bins, etc. This will enhance transparency of its services and facilitate objective understanding of the current effectiveness of recycling bins by the public. If relevant data is available from other departments, EPD may consider releasing data on the operation of recycling bins managed by various departments in one go to provide a more comprehensive overview of their usage. More thorough, comprehensive and regular information disclosure should be conducive to boosting public confidence in using recycling bins.

13. Moreover, we recommend that EPD continue to step up publicity and education, including sharing via different channels successful cases about how members of the public use recycling bins. The success experience can encourage more people to take part in waste reduction and recovery, and revive public confidence in the effectiveness of recycling bins.

Long-term Policy on Recycling Bins in Public Places

14. According to EPD's information, Green@Community, the community recycling network developed progressively since 2015, is supported by the general public and a key ongoing initiative under the Waste Blueprint for Hong Kong 2035. In view of this development, EPD has removed roadside recycling bins located near Recycling Stores and increased the number of bins in rural areas for more effective use of resources.

15. In the long run, EPD anticipates a declining demand for roadside recycling bins in urban areas. The role of recycling bins will also gradually transform into providing waste recycling support mainly for remote rural areas and residential premises on scattered sites. Such bins may even be completely replaced by Green@Community. The role played by recycling bins in public places under the Government's overall policy on waste separation and recovery is a policy issue not subject to our comments. Nevertheless, EPD should work out a schedule to review the policy positioning of recycling bins in public places for deciding on the way forward, and explain its decision for the public to understand why recycling bins in the community may be gradually reduced in number.

16. Meanwhile, should EPD decide to retain recycling bins in public places after review, we urge it to continue assessing any impact arising from waste charging due to be implemented later, including the usage of bins and the quality of collected recyclables. Corresponding measures should be adopted to ensure that recycling bins in public places continue to achieve efficacy.

Recommendations

17. Overall, this Office has made the following recommendations to EPD:

- (1) review the labels on recycling bins in public places and consider providing more recycling information in textual and graphical forms on the newly designed bins to enable the public to learn about the proper way of using recycling bins more conveniently and speedily;
- (2) update the "Waste Less" mobile application in a timely manner to ensure accuracy of information about recycling bins in public places;
- (3) continue strengthening collaboration with other departments responsible for recycling bin management and actively encourage them to maintain more recycling data, thereby facilitating the monitoring and adjustment of the management strategies of recycling bins;
- (4) release data on the operation of recycling bins in public places regularly to enhance transparency of its services and facilitate objective understanding of the current effectiveness of recycling bins by the public;

- (5) continue stepping up publicity and education, including sharing via different channels success cases about how members of the public use recycling bins, thereby encouraging more people to take part in waste reduction and recovery and reviving public confidence in the effectiveness of recycling bins; and
- (6) work out a schedule to review the policy positioning of recycling bins in public places for deciding on the way forward, and explain its decision for the public to understand why recycling bins in the community may be gradually reduced in number or even completely replaced; if it is decided that recycling bins in public places be retained, continue assessing any impact arising from waste charging due to be implemented later, and adopt corresponding measures to ensure that recycling bins in public places will continue to achieve efficacy.

Office of The Ombudsman
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